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# here (in your arms)

inkpinkheart

## Summary:

It didn't happen. Or at least that's what Bart tells himself on a daily basis.

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## Notes:

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Hi. I'm posting this up again. This fic is incredible important to me and close to my heart. It's so personal I can never decide if I want to keep it posted. But despite that, I hope you all enjoy it posted again. Fic title is from the song by hellogoodbye. As usual my fics are unbeta'd but I do my best. Enjoy! And much love.

It didn't happen. Or at least that's what Bart tells himself on a daily basis, repeats it like a bad song, a catchy mantra. It's the first thing drifting through his thoughts in the morning and the last thing on his mind before bed. A weight of shame that crushes him, stone heavy. And while it isn't a thing that should carry shame or weight, it suffocates him. The incident—or at least that's what he calls it—still leaves him shaken.

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Sometimes Bart wonders if the incident is a snowball, it keeps growing bigger, wider, as it tumbles further out of his control, unreachable destruction, and Bart is stuck in the middle. Spinning and Spinning and he can't stop. Still hasn't stopped spinning. He's dizzy with it.

But perhaps the incident was more of an avalanche, because Bart can't escape its crashing collision, trapped and breathless in the chill of it, barely hanging onto the precipice.

Maybe it is the start, the downfall, for all things in his life.

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He tells Lisa about the incident exactly one week after it happened. She's smart, the smartest person he knows. And although he mocks her for it, he envies—respects—her intelligence. She's wise beyond her years.

"Milhouse's reaction might have been negative," Lisa says softly, hardly audible over the fan's hum. Summer air, hot and humid whips through Bart's open window. It's suffocating and he rises to shut it. "But your feelings aren't, Bart. They aren't a bad thing."

But they *feel* bad—horrible even, Bart thinks. Rancid, all rotten and coiled ivy around his lungs.

He shuts the window with a slam—a ring of finality.

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A month after the incident, Milhouse moves out of town, into his Mom's and her rich new boyfriend's apartment. Bart's heart strains with it, aches and breaks with it, beats so hard against the cage of his ribs Bart fears they'll bruise. Because if it weren't for the incident, maybe Milhouse would still be around.

Even if Milhouse still lingers like an apparition in the confines of Bart's skull.

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Homer dies of a heart attack two years after the incident. And for Homer's lack of health the death is a shock for the entire family. It's a catalyst. A comet slamming into them. Cruel impact. Leaving everyone reeling through space, pain stricken in its wake. Lisa stops playing sax. And Marge, her smile doesn't shine as bright anymore, hasn't since the day they put Homer in the dirt. It's dull and waning, like the last final gasp of a candle's dwindling flame.

Bart feels his own light, what remains of it, waver.

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Lisa cries on his shoulder at the funeral, wets his fancy dress shirt but for once he doesn't complain—he can't care, not anymore. Marge holds his hand tightly. Her palm warm and wet



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Lisa cries on his shoulder at the funeral, wets his fancy dress shirt but for once he doesn't complain—he can't care, not anymore. Marge holds his hand tightly. Her palm warm and wet with sweat. Her grip is hard enough to break the fragile bones of his hand.

"It's ok to cry, sweetie," Marge says, through her own tears, thick and choked and strangled.

But Bart's tears refuse to fall. He tightens his chest, grips Marge's hand soundly while squaring his shoulders. A false bravado. False fortitude. He wouldn't cry over this. Hadn't cried since the incident. He wouldn't cry now.

He would—no needs—to be strong for them.

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Marge sells the family home when Bart turns thirteen, no longer able to afford it, even after she took a retail job down at the mall. The stress of raising three kids weighs on her, but she never complains, never remarries either, says she'll never find a man she could love as much as Homer. It's a dedication Bart can only wish and hope and dream for. His mother is a beacon, a lighthouse in these dark foreboding times. She is hope, when he remains hopeless for the kindness life could offer.

"Your father was something special," Marge says, tears clinging to the fringe of her mascara smudged lashes, as they pack up the car with boxes. Her emotions lay stricken in makeup smears, painted dark circles under her tired eyes.

It's heartbreaking, near soul shattering and crushing—somber to say the least—to watch his childhood packed away into cardboard. Every memory, every moment, wrapped in newspaper and hidden away. It wouldn't be the same when they unpacked, and reshelved it in their new two bedroom apartment across town. Every item would still scream and linger on about their times on Evergreen Terrace even after being placed on new clean shelves. They'd mourn the loss of their old home, the shelves layered thick with dust and the imprints they once

It's heartbreaking, near soul shattering and crushing—somber to say the least—to watch his childhood packed away into cardboard. Every memory, every moment, wrapped in newspaper and hidden away. It wouldn't be the same when they unpacked, and reshelfed it in their new two bedroom apartment across town. Every item would still scream and linger on about their times on Evergreen Terrace even after being placed on new clean shelves. They'd mourn the loss of their old home, the shelves layered thick with dust and the imprints they once carved into them.

"I'm sure," Bart says with the roll of his eyes, it's easier to remain sarcastic, to not ruminate on the hurt of it all, the marrow deep torment that comes with sudden grief. If he focused on the agony that is and was the loss of his father, he'd drowned under the waves of it. It's surreal and he's not ready to sit in its reality. He's adrift at sea on a life raft, hardly afloat. His sorrow is a storm, a dangerous thing. And it threatens to swallow him whole.

With a strong hand, Marge stops Bart in his tracks, gripping his shoulder with force enough to bruise. He sets the box he's carrying on the curb to meet her eyes, saddened but certain.

"One day you'll understand, sweetie."

He understands, at least in his own way, has since the night of the incident.

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He watches the Simpson house shrink through the rearview mirror as they drive away. It grows smaller and smaller, gone as they round the corner. Everything that was, disappearing. It's the end of an era. Like closing a chapter in a book. The conclusion of his childhood stings worse than a summer bee on his unsuspecting bare feet.

A heavy pit settles in his guts, leaves him nauseous and furious. He replays the loss of his home beneath his eyelids at night. It cycles on repeat, a tape on rewind, grainer with each replay.

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He thinks of Milhouse often, dreams of him, loathes his very existence as much as he yearns for him and his friendship again. It haunts him. Milhouse, haunts him. He wishes to go back in time, to erase the incident and heal all harm he's done.

Maybe then, everything could've been different.

His guilt is inconsolable, unconscionable.

He sits with it.

He sits in it.

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Sometimes he sneaks back into his childhood tree house in the thick black night to smoke. Inhales acrid tobacco and exhales a haze of cloudy gray. He imagines a world where Milhouse stayed and Homer never died. He always imagines. A universe where Homer grows old, calmer and less angry in his age. Where Milhouse forgives him, accepts him back as the moon accepts the sun every morning rise. Open armed and warm hearted. They'd be inseparable. Ride bikes until stars dotted the sky and their knees were scraped and bruised from colliding with the pavement. And when their tires went flat Homer would help mend the leaks.

He's never really present.

Not anymore.

It's better—living in a dream.

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As soon as he's able, he drops out of school. Marge never voices her disapproval, but Bart feels her broken heart, it beats with his own. He feels it when she leans over to press a kiss to his temple before bed, haste and tired. Nothing keeps him in school, no friends he wants to graduate with, he finds no pleasure being the class clown anymore. There's no humor in his hollow chest. And he never considered himself smart



his hollow chest. And he never considered himself smart enough to push for good grades.

He's not Lisa or Maggie in that way.

He gets a job at the Krusty Burger, manning the drive thru window and flipping burgers. The scent of grease and beef clings to his uniform and follows him home. But it's worth it, to help Marge pay the electric bill.

"Why don't you go to the arcade? Or buy yourself some comics, sweetie?" She asks, lines of stress marring her face. Bart wishes he has the power to ease every worry she carries. But he can't even ease his own.

"I don't need anything like that." He huffs, faking indifference as well as he can.

With the mere shake of her head, Marge turns away from him, heating a TV dinner in the microwave. She doesn't really cook anymore. If she hasn't the time, or a chicken in the oven reminds her too much of Homer's love of food, Bart doesn't know. Maybe it's both. Maybe it's neither. Maybe it's her own way of keeping her wounds bandaged and mended, because if she didn't they'd burst out and open, visceral and wide.

The whirring sound of the food turning in the microwave's heat pierces his stomach.

With hunger.

With culpability.

He's the family disappointment, even though Marge would never dare say or think it. Bart knows he is. His failure is blindingly bright, achingly so.

But his job, and money he gifted his mother gives him some semblance of pride. No matter how small and insignificant.

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It's like a teenage drama movie, Bart thinks, how he feels, and not the funny kind. It's pathetic, to still pine and need and ache

It's like a teenage drama movie, Bart thinks, how he feels, and not the funny kind. It's pathetic, to still pine and need and ache after all these years. On the night of what would've been his senior prom, he finds himself sneaking into his old backyard, up the planks on the big old tree and into his rickety tree house. The ladder worn and leaving the palms of his hands splinter filled and sore.

It's suffocating, the wave of memories that threaten to drown him here. He can hear Homer, his laugh, his dumb bravado, his rage and Bart aches for it all. The good and bad. He misses his childhood bed, the warmth and naïve peace it brought him and homemade dinner every night. He misses Marge's soft smile and the cacophony of Lisa's saxophone. He misses a world before Maggie spoke, when Marge chuckled, and Lisa teased him. He misses a world where Homer failed but tried endlessly.

He misses a world before the incident.

And suddenly he's thrown back there, in his old bedroom, in his stained mattress, under the covers with Milhouse. He's ten again, incredibly foolish but happy, laughing with Milhouse about Radioactive Man. It was dark in his room, his night light painting them in artificial dim yellow light.

And Milhouse smiled.

Bart remembers how brightly it lit up his heart. How warm and safe he felt. And how much love encompassed him, threatening to overflow and cascade out of him, gooey ooey waterfall infatuation. It was innocent, the love of a child, a first love. And in that moment of innocence, he leaned forward, until he felt Milhouse's breath against his cheek—smelled his saccharine bubblegum toothpaste—until their lips touched. He could taste the lanolin of Milhouse's lip balm.

It lasted only a moment, the incident. Milhouse didn't return the kiss. He pulled away, a look of utter shocked disgust written violent and evident across his face.

Bart fears it to this day.



Bart fears it to this day.

"What the hell!?" Milhouse said.

Bart's heart raced high in the confines of his throat, he struggled to swallow over it. He fought to cover it, hide and erase the moment, "It was a joke, man."

But it wasn't.

Milhouse packed his bag and ran down the stairs. It was the last time Bart ever saw him.

Bart wonders now, if he'd never kissed Milhouse, if Milhouse would've stayed. If they would've grown up together. If Milhouse would've stood with him at Homer's funeral, shouldering the grief of his father's loss together. If he would've visited Bart at the family's new apartment. If Bart would've stayed in school.

He lives in a what if world, a world of what if the incident never happened. And he's stuck.

He struggles to take a breath, each inhale pained and small, lungs failing to expand in the curve of his ribs, his face wet and hot with it. Splotchy and snotty. Horrified he wipes furiously at his cheeks with the back of his hand as the tears pool freely, run rivulets down his cheeks, still slightly round with baby fat.

He feels ten again, lost and alone upstairs while Marge drove Milhouse home.

"Bart?"

Embarrassed, he looks up, wide eyed to see Milhouse climbing into the small tree house. He's taller now, thicker, older with sporadic facial hair. But he still looks like the same goofy Milhouse Bart knew all those years ago.

Bart yearns, aches and grieves all at once.

"I called Lisa, she said you'd probably be here."

Milhouse must be a ghost, Bart willed him into existence, pure

Milhouse must be a ghost, Bart willed him into existence, pure delusions.

But Milhouse reaches out, his hands hot against Bart's cold one.

He's real, so very real.

It hits Bart, whiplash quick with the force of a train making impact.

"Are you okay?" He asks and Bart can't answer, because he's shaking and doesn't know how to stop. Before he can react Milhouse is pulling him to him, soft and gentle in ways Bart thinks he no longer deserves.

Bart cries, for the first time in years. It leaves him in a wet heaved up humiliating mess. Sobs into Milhouse's shirt, guilty for it because Milhouse is rich and it must be Gucci or Ralph Lauren unlike Bart's shirts, second hand Goodwill finds. But Milhouse doesn't seem to mind, he holds Bart close, like he never left, like the incident never happened.

It's cathartic.

Milhouse is shaking too, Bart realizes, speaking fast and quick, his words a whisper, a tickle against Bart's ear. "I'm sorry. I should've never left, but when you kissed me, I was so confused, afraid. I ran. I kept running. And by the time I realized I wanted to kiss you back. I'd been away for too many years, I thought you'd hate me. I didn't know how to come back."

It takes Bart's brain a moment to register, the rapid rise and fall of his chest slowing. A steady wary and weary calm envelops him.

"You want to kiss me back?" He says, rather simply, rather dumbly.

"Yeah," Milhouse answers, a soft and sad smile on his lips. One filled with years of regret. And Bart wishes he could erase it. Erase all the time they lost, everything they lost. "I do."

"Why come back now?" Fretting, and full of fear, Bart pulls at his

"Why come back now?" Fretting, and full of fear, Bart pulls at his rat tail, an anxious gesture.

"I was back in town visiting my Dad, and I couldn't stop thinking about you. It just seemed like the right time to make peace," Milhouse says, scratching his arm, avoiding Bart's eyes for the moment.

"Make peace?" Bart accuses, a hint, a glimmer of a rage, a small flame in his belly beginning to light.

The waves at sea lick against his life raft.

"That's not what I mean," Milhouse sighs.

"What the hell do you mean?" A hiss leaves Bart's throat, his head pounding.

"Bart," Milhouse says steadily, "I love you. Like, love, love you. And I'm sorry I'm a coward and I ran for so long. But I—"

Before Milhouse can finish, the wail of a police siren cuts through the night. The red and blue lights slicing across the darkness.

"You kids are on private property!" Police Chief Wiggum calls, approaching the Simpson's old backyard, his flashlight rounding the corner. He's older, fatter and slower than he's ever been. But despite the minimal threat he offers. Bart's heart spikes up in rhythm, he couldn't get charged with trespassing. No matter how small the risk.

"Oh shit," Bart swears, meeting Milhouse's eyes for the first time that night. And he sees it there, Milhouse's earnestness and acceptance. Hardly having a moment to consider it, Bart throws an old discarded glass beer bottle in Wiggum's direction, hearing the bottle shatter against the fence. With the cop distracted, Bart scrambles out of the treehouse, Milhouse close behind him.

It's like being a kid, like embracing a second childhood, escaping and causing trouble. They're running so fast Bart can feel his heart racing, hammering hard, threatening to break free from its



It's like being a kid, like embracing a second childhood, escaping and causing trouble. They're running so fast Bart can feel his heart racing, hammering hard, threatening to break free from its cage. And Bart wants it to. Wants to feel song bird free again. The wind whips hard against his tear stained cheeks, cold, bitter and wet. But he's laughing. Laughing for the first time he can remember in a long while, for the first time since the incident and since Homer fell six feet under.

Bart pushes his feet forward, soles thudding against the pavement in rapid succession, because Milhouse grabs his hands, their fingers tangled together and there is warmth there. Warmth in their shared connection.

He's struggling to breathe again, when they stop. Milhouse's hand falls from his and he mourns the loss of it, realizing where they are. The whole reason for his night's melancholy. Streetlights beam artificial gold in the parking lot of the highschool. Music from the prom, booming through the brick walls, so loud Bart can feel it vibrate his toes through his sneakers.

*'well you are the one , the one that lies close to me.'*

"I kept thinking how if you hadn't moved away, if I hadn't kissed you when we were kids and ruined everything. Maybe we would've gone together. Not as each other's dates, but at least as friends," Bart says over the knot in his throat, the familiar ache and pain threatening to erupt. Volcanic.

But Milhouse stops it, hand firm and hard, reassuring and comforting as it grips Bart's shoulder. He studies the way Milhouse's fat fingertips disappear into the fabric of his stained t-shirt, "I'm sorry. I'm here now, and I'm not leaving."

*'whispers hello, I miss you quite terribly'*

Milhouse's glasses are fogged by the mix of cold night air and his hot breath. Bart smiles softly, chest heavy, in the best way possible, as Milhouse wraps certain arms around Bart's waist. And grins a foolish grin as the song continues to play.

"Can I have this dance?" Milhouse asks like they're the heroes of

"Can I have this dance?" Milhouse asks like they're the heroes of some cheese filled romcom. And somehow Bart finds no humor in that thought, he cherishes it.

*'I fell in love , In love with you suddenly'*

"You don't even have to ask, dude," Bart answers, voice thick with something he won't give name to. Not yet.

*'Now there's no place else I could be , But here in your arms'*

His shaky hands grip Milhouse's hips as they sway to the song. And under the stars, streetlamps, and silver moonlight they dance. It isn't perfect. But it's right. Bart's cheek resting against Milhouse's shoulder, the scent of his strong cologne tickling Bart's nose. But he doesn't mind. Because for the first time since the incident, there's sun in his storm, and it stops raging.

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